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V.—TWO POINTS IN FRENCH STYLE.

To a much greater extent than either Englishmen or Germans the French have striven and still strive after a fine style. Instruction in Latin and Greek in the French schools is so directed as to be mainly a training in writing good French. The great effort of the teachers is, and has been for centuries, to develop a feeling for style, one of the forms of good taste, the favorite and dominant characteristic of the nation. I wish to draw attention to two changes in modern French prose which seem to be a result of a continuous endeavor to improve style.

The first requisite of a good prose style is that it should be clear, and accordingly perfect clearness is a common characteristic of French literature from Malherbe down. To reduce as much as possible the effort which the reader has to make has been a prime object among French prose writers for the last two hundred and fifty years. They very early gave up the striking inversions and the forcible compressions and audacities which add so much to the poetic value of the *Chanson de Roland*, mainly, it would seem, to gain in clearness of expression an essentially prosaic quality. Looking in the later language for phenomena growing out of a cultivation of this quality, it occurred to me that a gradual shortening of the length of sentences might be expected. The labor involved in following the current of thought in a long sentence is often considerable, and if the long sentences come close together, soon becomes very tiresome; the faculty of attention becomes strained, every now and then the sense is lost and you have to go back to the beginning of the sentence. Accordingly a gradual shortening of the length of sentences would be expected, and the evidence I have collected shows that such a shortening has actually taken place. As a rough means of obtaining the average length of one hundred consecutive sentences in any writer, I have estimated the average number of verbs in each sentence, on the theory that the ratio between the average number of words and the average number of verbs in one hundred consecutive French sentences will be nearly constant, so that the number of verbs and the number of words will vary proportionately, and one may be taken as the

index of the other. As far as I have tested this theory it is borne out by the facts. In various writers, from Montaigne down to modern times, the ratio between the number of words and the number of verbs in a sentence varies in different sentences from 4 : 1 to 15 : 1 ; but the average ratio of a sufficiently large number of sentences is invariably between 6 : 1 and 7 : 1.

Taking then one hundred consecutive sentences in Montaigne, I found an average of 6.02 verbs for a mean Montaigne sentence. Taking in Fénelon, who comes about a century later, one hundred consecutive sentences in the same way, the mean Fénelon sentence was found to contain 4.48 verbs, making a drop of 1.54. Voltaire, who may be taken to represent the 18th century, yields an average of 3.89, or 0.59 less than Fénelon, and he is the first writer whose crisp sentences have the ring of modern French. Finally, coming to contemporaneous French, Sainte-Beuve yields an average sentence with 3.95 verbs, and Alphonse Daudet one with 3.38 verbs, a drop from Fénelon of 0.53 and 1.10 respectively. Of course these figures should be confirmed by subjecting more authors to the same tests, but as a provisional result it is interesting.

Improvement in clearness through shortening of the sentence is, however, a characteristic which cannot be claimed as exclusively French. The same thing has certainly occurred in English, as may be seen by comparing Milton and Cromwell's prose with that of any modern writer. But there is another trait of modern French prose style which is more peculiar to it. This is the aim of many French writers to keep the fancy of the reader in a constant state of agreeable exercise. This tendency shows itself in the artful carelessness of the arrangement, and in the occasional appearance of startling yet appropriate images ; but it also appears, especially in more modern writers, in the use made of a large class of attributive adjectives. Most adjectives in French follow the noun, a few always precede it ; but a large class of adjectives denoting, most of them, what are called moral characteristics, may come either before or after the noun as the writer pleases. He may place one of these adjectives before or after the noun either from mere accident, or because he thinks it sounds better, or finally because he thinks that one order of succession rather than the other will produce just the effect he is striving after. If there is nothing but accident in the matter, the chances will be that analogy will unconsciously make him place the adjective after its noun ; if it is put first it will either be for euphony or for some other definite

reason. In prose of the classic period the guiding motive where preposition occurs is very often euphony. I have collected all the cases that occur in Bossuet's funeral oration at the burial of Henriette d'Angleterre. Bossuet is very fond of pouring forth a sonorous flood of epithets; but his only motive in determining their position seems to be to round off his periods as harmoniously as possible. 'Prédestination éternelle' stands near 'éternelle prédestination,' 'la véritable vie' near 'les biens véritables,' 'la naturelle situation' near 'la mutabilité naturelle,' 'saints conseils' near 'vérités saintes,' with no discoverable reason except euphony for using one order rather than the other. But in the writing of his more attractive rival, Fénelon, we can see already a different motive appear, which can be traced with increasing frequency in some modern writers. To show what this motive is, it will be best to look into the mental process we go through when in reading we come upon a noun and an attributive adjective. Mr. Herbert Spencer, in his *Essay on the Philosophy of Style*, contrasting the English preposition with the French postposition of the adjective, prefers the English usage on the ground that it requires no re-arrangement of the idea conveyed by the noun to suit the modification of that idea introduced by the adjective. When, he says, we hear the expression—a horse black—we first picture to ourselves on hearing the noun a brown image, brown horses being the commonest, and this image we have to correct to suit the subsequent black, while in the English order we first call up blackness, and in this blackness cut out our horse. He concludes then that, on the great principle of economizing the reader's attention as much as possible, the English usage is far preferable. This seems plausible enough, but proceeds, as it seems to me, on a radically false view of what takes place in the mind. It supposes a definiteness in the images called up which is very far from existing. In ordinary reading, or in listening to rapid speaking, where abstract and concrete, generic and specific names follow close on each other, what comes before the mind of a grown-up man when a generic term such as horse without an adjective is read or heard, is rather a sense that he knows all about the thing meant and that he can, if necessary, call up an image of it than an actual clear-cut image of a particular brown horse, or of an ideal brown horse unconsciously evolved by the mind; and unless the horse plays an important part in what follows, the sense of ability to call up an image if wanted is all that need come into play. If then a

distinguishing epithet such as black be added, the animal springs at once before the mind, without the expenditure of the slightest amount of unnecessary attention. In writing which appeals solely to the reasoning powers the less attention devoted to sensual images the better, and surely less attention to a sensual image is called for when we hear 'a horse black,' than when we hear the black first, and conjure up in our minds an indefinite amount of darkness out of which the horse is then cut. For purely intellectual writing then, it seems that the French usage of postposition is the best, and there is this great additional advantage, that the writer wishing to appeal to the fancy of his readers can do so very effectively by putting the adjective out of its usual place. The placing before the noun of an adjective which he has usually seen after it calls up an exceptionally strong image of the quality designated before a modern Frenchman's mind; a veil, as it were, sometimes bright, sometimes mysterious, is thrown over the following noun, and the fancy is exercised very much in the same way as when listening to the fantastic embroidery of appogiaturas which in Chopin's music so often precedes the most telling note of the melody. Of course this is a thing which is more easily felt than expressed or proved; but a few examples will perhaps make it plainer. Out of thirty different adjectives of the class we are considering placed before their nouns in as many octavo pages of the *Télémaque*, there are perhaps half a dozen where this exciting of the fancy rather than euphony seems to be the determining motive of the preposition. Thus, contrary to the general use of the language in prose, which is to put color epithets after the noun, he tells us of 'de jaunes épis,' 'une noire tempête,' 'le noir Tartare,' making the yellowness of the corn and the blackness of the tempest and of Tartarus much more vivid and pervasive. Of course the transition from a purely euphonic preposition of the adjective to its preposition for the purpose of producing a fantastic lingering over the epithet is very gradual. In many cases euphony seems to be the main determining motive, with, however, the merest additional touch of something else. The more unusual it is for a certain adjective to be before a certain noun, the more forcible will be the effect produced when it is put before that noun, and the more likely it is to have been put there mainly to increase the emotional effect, and not for euphony.

In the *Confessions* of Rousseau I have collected thirty-five cases of preposition in ten quarto pages. Among them there is one, 'ce

misérable honneur,' where the preposition adds very much to the vigor of the expression, and several such as 'une voluptueuse langueur,' and 'ma charmante maîtresse,' where a certain dwelling on the epithet is evidently intended.

Chateaubriand, who employs preposition more sparingly than the older writers I have mentioned, does it with far more boldness, discrimination and effect. In an amount of the *Génie du Christianisme* equal to that taken from Rousseau and Fénelon I found only twenty-three cases of preposition; but of these eight were striking instances of poetic effect. Thus: 'qu'il était étonnant d'oser trouver des conformités entre nos jours mortels et *l'éternelle* existence du maître du monde;' 'de croulants portiques,' 'leurs innombrables jours.' But his use of 'sacré' is his boldest and perhaps most effective case of preposition. As a rule in prose sacré means sacred only when it follows the noun; and in rather trivial style it is put before the noun in the sense of accursed. Chateaubriand, by prepositing it in particularly solemn passages, throws a kind of awful glamour over the following noun which nothing else could give: 'Sacrés débris des monuments chrétiens, vous ne rappelez point des injustices et des violences.'

In La Bruyère, who does not at all appeal to the imagination, preposition is infrequent, and euphony seems to be the only motive.

In Alphonse Daudet, out of twenty cases of preposition seven seemed to have a distinctly imaginative or emotional ground.

Finally, in that extremely sober and chastened writer, Prosper Mérimée, I found only fifteen cases of preposition in thirty pages; but thirteen of these have just enough glow about them to titillate the reader's fancy agreeably and raise a little ripple in the smooth current of the story.

Thus a desire to excite the reader's fancy agreeably, combined with the influence of analogy, seems to be working in two directions. On the one hand there is a tendency to use preposition less and less, on the other hand it is used less frequently for euphony and more frequently to excite the fancy. A liberty which was formerly made use of for euphony alone, has been taken advantage of for a much higher purpose, and we have here an instance of how the persistent cultivation of style is tending to make the language a more and more delicate instrument.

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